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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 008605

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/31/2013

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN PRIME MINISTER EASILY WINS VOTE OF  
CONFIDENCE, BUT FACES CHALLENGES AHEAD

REF: A. AMMAN 07507

[1](#)B. AMMAN 05245

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for Reasons 1.5 (b), (d)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez and his Cabinet easily won a parliamentary vote of confidence December 23 with 85 out of 110 MPs backing his government. Twenty-two MPs cast a "nay" vote, including all 17 members of the Islamic Action Front who chided the government for failing to spell out how it would achieve political development and improve the economy. During the debate, MPs made repeated calls for greater public and political freedoms, alleviation of poverty and unemployment, and an end to corruption. Some MPs criticized Cabinet ministers, though not Fayeze himself, with Planning Minister Bassem Awadallah coming under particular fire, including for alleged corruption. Legislators also warned against increasing taxes or prices of subsidized goods. Fayeze continues to enjoy considerable popularity in Parliament, but will find it difficult to satisfy MPs' demands in the coming months. End Summary.

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AN EASY WIN  
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[1](#)2. (U) After more than three days of deliberations in the Lower House of Parliament, Prime Minister Fayeze and his Cabinet won an overwhelming vote of confidence on December [1](#)23. 85 MPs (roughly 77% of the Lower House) voted in favor of Fayeze's government, while 22 cast a negative vote, including all 17 members of the Islamic Action Front (IAF). Three other legislators abstained. Not including the IAF, all the parliamentary blocs (which account for approximately 80 of the 110 MPs) voted for the government, except for two members of the Democratic Alliance bloc.

[1](#)3. (U) The margin of Fayeze's victory closely matches the 84 votes won by former Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb in August of this year (see ref b). However, while 109 MPs insisted on delivering an address during deliberations on Abul Ragheb's government, stretching out the process to more than 5 days, only 76 MPs chose to speak this time around. All the blocs in Parliament agreed to limit the number of their members who took to the floor, save for the IAF whose members delivered individual orations.

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ISLAMIST OBJECTIONS  
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[1](#)4. (C) Due to Fayeze's conciliatory outreach efforts to prominent Islamists (see ref a), several political analysts predicted that the IAF would at least abstain from the vote of confidence, rather than vote against Fayeze's government. But according to prominent IAF MP Ali Abul Sukkar (Zarqa, 2nd District), "We did not hear sufficient answers from the prime minister on how his government is going to tackle two important issues to us: political development and the economic situation."

[1](#)5. (U) IAF MPs addressed a variety of issues during their turn on the Lower House floor, including fighting corruption, applying Islamic Sharia law, combating price increases, supporting the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and rejecting the MEPP roadmap. On the cultural side, Nidal Abbadi (East Banker, Amman - 6th District) called for the government to swiftly counter all forms of "moral corruption and degradation," including nightclubs, unisex swimming pools, and male-run hair salons for women. On a more political bent, Ali Utoum (East Banker, Irbid - 1st District) demanded the revocation of the peace treaty with Israel, greater public freedoms, and the end to alleged harassment of Muslim Brotherhood clerics.

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YOU'RE OKAY, BUT THEY'RE NOT  
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[1](#)6. (U) Although the Islamists withheld their confidence from

Fayez's government, they made clear that this was not connected with Fayez as an individual. Several IAF MPs, echoing many in Parliament, had laudatory words for Fayez and his efforts at dialogue with diverse aspects of Jordanian society. MP Abul Sukkar told the press that the IAF's decision "has nothing to do with personal issues related to Fayez."

17. (U) While Fayez escaped personal criticism from MPs, his Cabinet ministers were not as fortunate. Head of the Democratic Alliance bloc, Mamdouh Abbadi (East Banker, Amman - 3rd District) denounced the way the Cabinet was formed -- at a private retreat without input from Parliament -- and its failure to include ministers from five governorates. "It is not true that the formation disregarded geography for the sake of ability," stated Abbadi. Former Prime Minister Abdur Rawabdeh (East Banker, Irbid - 2nd District) also voiced concern over the Cabinet makeup, while Ghazi Zaben (East Banker, Central Badia) alleged that, "Several incumbent ministers have nothing to their credit except a few media appearances, clearly stating that competence was not taken into account when forming the government."

18. (U) Other MPs attacked unnamed Cabinet members for being too Western and out of touch with Jordanian reality. IAF MP Nidal Abbadi, for example, implied that some ministers were lacking in basic knowledge of Jordan, to the point they would fail an open-book quiz on the country, and in some cases of the Arabic language. He charged that due to their Western leanings, they "cannot recount the names of three villages in Jordan; they are also unfamiliar with Amman, especially the eastern (i.e., poor, predominantly West Banker) part. They do not even know the prices of basic commodities and may not be carrying Jordanian currency."

19. (C) While Abbadi did not provide any names, it is likely that Planning Minister Bassem Awadallah was at least one of his targets. (NOTE: Awadallah told Ambassador that he was undoubtedly the primary "lightning rod" for MPs' criticism.) Awadallah was specifically mentioned, however, in a scathing attack by MP Abdullah Al-Akayleh (East Banker, Tafilah - 1st District) who said that Awadallah was a "source of danger" to the government and "the godfather" of backroom deals. Akayleh asked Fayez to investigate allegations that Awadallah had improper ties with the Canadian company that won a share in the state potash company, as well as with a business awarded a U.S. military contract for food service in Iraq and with a company chosen to computerize Jordanian schools. During the debate, a total of three ministers were accused of corruption.

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MPs SPEAK OUT  
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110. (U) A recurrent theme throughout the vote of confidence debate was political development, with nearly all deputies making reference to it in their speeches. The MPs called on the government to fulfill its pledge for greater democracy and political freedom. Controversial MP Abdul Rahim Malhas (East Banker, Amman - 3rd District), however, slammed the government's political development plan as "a practical lie directly translated from a U.S. program on political participation in return for assistance to Middle East countries launched by U.S. State Department official Elizabeth Cheney."

111. (U) Economic issues also dominated the deliberations as MPs urged the government to tackle aggressively the problems of poverty and high unemployment. Several MPs warned the government not to raise prices of subsidized commodities or increase taxes. Emad Maayah (Christian East Banker, Madaba - 1st District), for example, cautioned that the government must not "touch the pocket" of Jordanians as "the fury of the IMF is better than the fury of God Almighty or the citizen." Other MPs spoke out against government plans to privatize state industries.

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A HEATED EXCHANGE  
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112. (U) The third day of debate was interrupted December 22 when MP Abdul Munem Abu Zant (West Banker, Amman - 2nd District) and MP Rawabdeh exchanged insults and accusations over the 1999 expulsion of four Hamas leaders from Jordan. Abu Zant charged that the government's expulsion decision, taken when Rawabdeh was Prime Minister, was "unconstitutional." Rawabdeh angrily replied that, "It was part of the commitment to my national duty to protect the country's security and I have never tried to avoid carrying out my national duty or apologize for it." The angry verbal sparring between the two MPs lasted for several minutes until other legislators calmed the men down and restored order to the Lower House floor.

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FAYEZ RESPONDS  
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113. (U) At the end of the deliberations, Fayeze gave a 45-minute address to the Parliament, focusing on his commitment to battle unemployment, alleviate poverty, and fight corruption. The government's economic action plan, according to Fayeze, aimed at achieving a genuine economic growth rate of 6% for the years 2004-2006 and an inflation rate of 1.8% by the end of 2006. The government's Anti-Corruption Committee will be reformed and strengthened to scrutinize government operations, while an empowered Audit Bureau will help safeguard both investor and public funds. Fayeze said he would also concentrate on improving education, health care and other social and economic programs.

114. (U) Fayeze further promised to push ahead with political development, adding "May God forgive the brother who suggested that we are about to embark on political development, transparency and public participation (as) answers to an American request." Outside of domestic issues, Fayeze pledged "categorical support" for the Palestinian and Iraqi people, but reiterated the government's policy against the settlement of new refugees, either from Iraq or the West Bank/Gaza, on Jordanian soil.

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COMMENT  
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115. (C) While Fayeze easily secured Parliament's vote of confidence and enjoys broad popularity, he will be hard pressed to satisfy the many demands put forward by MPs. Fayeze expressed frustration to the Ambassador, for example, that some in Parliament apparently expected political development to happen "overnight." Fayeze may also come under increasing pressure to provide the details of how he plans to implement his somewhat vague promises of reforming the political system and strengthening the economy.

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